

Finding Shelter for the Homeless and Their Companion Animals: Implications for administrative change

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Introduction

- About 1.56 million people, or about 0.5% of the U.S. population, use emergency shelters.
- One out of 50 children or 1.5 million children will be homeless each year.
- There are 57,849 homeless veterans, or 12 percent of all homeless adults. Just under 8% are female.
- Texas, California and Florida have the highest numbers of unaccompanied homeless youth under the age of 18, comprising 58% of the total homeless under 18 youth population.
- Homelessness affects men more than women. At least 70% to 85% of all homeless are men (AHAR, 2015).
- Studies of companion animals of the homeless have demonstrated improved human cardiovascular health, reduction in stress, decreased loneliness and depression, and facilitation of social interactions among people. Adversely, giving up companion animals has been found to have detrimental effects on overall health (Lee & Willson, 2017).

Companion & Service Animals

Service Animals (Dogs)

- ADA defines a service animal as dogs who are trained to work or perform tasks for people with, physical, sensory, psychiatric, intellectual, or mental disabilities (ADA, 2017).
- These are considered working animals, not a pets.

Companion Animals (Dogs, miniature horses, cats, birds)

- Companion animals provide stability through psychological, physiological, and social benefits.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore facilitating space for animal companions with homeless shelter administrators.

Aims

To understand present policies and practices for sheltering companion animals.

To understand the impact sheltering companion animals may have on shelter management.



Methods

Design

- Qualitative description design using a mixed method approach for data collection.

Recruitment

- Purposive sampling with a snowballing technique. No incentives were offered for participation.

Instrument

- The Facilitator Structured Interview Guide framed by a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis.

Results

Demographics

- Sites 5 Urban and 5 Rural (N=10)
- Administrators for 6 months to 14 years

Interviewee quotes:

Strengths

- *"Companion animals provide really incredible emotional support for families that are experiencing homelessness..."*
- *"...the older people ...coming in to the shelters, a lot a times, they had no one except their pet...that was the only consistent thing they could count on..."*

Weaknesses

- *"Companion animals are not necessary for people's health and well-being."*
- *"I can't take up space for companion animals, that means somebody else is sleeping on the street."*

Opportunities

- *"...multiple people would have companion animals if we had the space for them, but we don't"*
- *"...companion animals are part of the family,...nobody wants to see children crying because you had to give Fluffy away"*
- *"...losing your home you're also going to lose your animal is completely traumatic for people"*
- *"We get several (homeless people) that say, 'I'm not parting with my animal'. I get that."*

Threats

- *"...when we bring animals to live here, it starts a chaotic situation... people could be afraid, they're allergic..., their comfort is equal to those that need to bring in a companion animal"*

Discussion

Summary

Central Concept

- Homeless persons have a strong, unyielding bond with their companion animals that over-rides personal needs.

Over-arching Theme

- Homeless with companion animals have difficulty finding housing or employment and will refuse opportunities for placement if companion animals are not permitted, thus impacting the decision-making process of exiting homelessness if terminating the human/animal relationship is required.

Conclusions

- Companion animals play a significant role in effecting change or providing stability to the homeless.
- High levels of pet-attachment may cause difficulty finding housing as shelters may refuse to house homeless with companion animals or the homeless may refuse placement if companion animals are not allowed.
- Some shelters will accept the homeless and their companion animals.
- Findings have implications for point of care agencies to tailor services to the needs of homeless persons with companion animals to support improved health outcomes.
- Healthcare providers could use their political voices to affect social and financial actions to support homeless facilities abilities to shelter companion animals.

References

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